

The Moratuwa Experiment: Rehabilitation Centre for Street Children

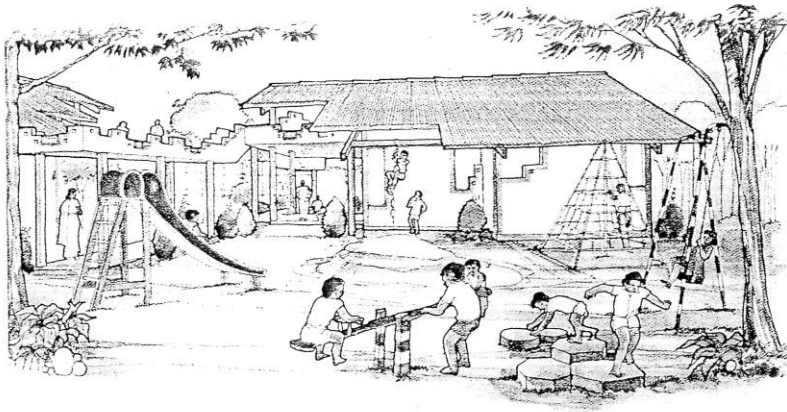
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Our belief is that socially responsible architecture is created out of an internalized socially responsible attitude. Discussion *with* the users is of limited value in this endeavor. What is of value is the ability to broaden any design project into its social base and to subsequently identify a social problem which incorporates an architectural component, the solution to which is then socially responsible architecture. Such a teaching/learning process has been developed at the Department of Architecture at the University of Moratuwa and has since been known as The Moratuwa Experiment.

The Rehabilitation Centre for Street Children was a "live" project already selected and approved by a panel as a final-year student thesis. The reasons for selection vary a great deal and in this instance, as in all Moratuwa Experiment cases, the student is made to look for the possible presence of a significant "problem" at the outset, which is subsequently made more complex (for educational purposes) by introducing other constraints of locality, activity requirements, budget limitations, etc. This project had a good story of human suffering evoking much sympathy in the community; there was also a counter-reaction of apathy and cynicism arising from a deeply class-conscious community; the site was close to a Buddhist temple, in a mixture of low income residential/small commercial neighborhood; the "user"/client had clearly definable habits/aspirations/value systems; and the project was funded by a "rich" overseas charitable organization.

More than destitution or lack of love and care, the biggest problem seemed to be the "sense of freedom" among the potential users who had never been "confined" within buildings; yet who *must* appear to be normal if they are to be accepted, rehabilitated and absorbed into "normal" society and, ironically, the sense of confinement architecture evokes. In addition, the funding client required that any program or architecture be made visible and outstanding (thus advertising its involvement and boosting its reputation). The design approach, then, had to combine subtle and underplayed intervention so as not to overwhelm the user with high visibility for the sake of the funding client. The idea was to create an architecture which was permanent yet non-confining; which was similar to the surrounding vernacular but had the impact of a product of the grand tradition. It had to *help* while betraying to the outside, the *helping hand*; it had to be one with the low income residences and small scale commercial establishments but stand out with a resolute and determined profile.

This project is socially responsible because its architecture aids the rehabilitation process that happens at the Centre. It does this by facilitating the users to be at ease. In this process, it is important to develop an insight into the behavior, life styles, happenings and events in the users' lives and to transform them into applicable spatial concepts. The public activities are arranged along a spine in a linear movement — it is the atmosphere of the familiar street but with subtle order. The entrance is an extension of the road intersection (where boutiques similar to those in the vicinity are placed) which leads to the "street"; from the diagonal spine of public activity (street) a walkway transits into a semi-public area and then to a private area where the family units into which they retire from the "street" are placed. Separating work and rest are essential ingredients of rehabilitation. The togetherness of street life was retained by introducing clustered family units which empty into a core of interaction, subtly ordering the street life style. In plan form and in three dimensional form the composition of spaces is small and staggered. Its relevance is twofold: to evoke a sense of movement and eventfulness present in a street and to make the spaces belong to the "child," by suggesting the sense



of freedom and happiness of childhood. The main spine opens onto the temple at the end, reminding passersby of a life beyond, a belief which helps them to overcome temptation. The upper level spaces and ground level spaces become one, flow into one another, and then grow into the exterior, thus helping to contain without being contained. The administration uses the complex above and the rest of the complex is attached to it in a cluster that confers a sense of authority and control, without which such a centre would cease to function.

Panel comments: We included this project because it was submitted as an example of The Moratuwa Experiment, a 10 year old project in the Architectural Department at the University of Moratuwa in Sri Lanka. Its purpose is to make architecture more socially relevant by treating architecture and architectural education as a social endeavor. By focusing on the internal process of architectural decision making, The Moratuwa Experiment attempts to link Western concepts of psychology with Buddhist and Hindu principles. Students approach all projects by relating them to larger societal issues. It is interesting that the two projects received from south and southeast Asia both deal with street children, an important worldwide problem, yet one that receives little coverage in the Western press. We were impressed with the sense of humanity that is apparent from the drawings and climatological appropriateness of the building. The program development and the spatial design were motivated by strong social goals.

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